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## Article

## Video Activism and the Ambiguities of Counter-Surveillance

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### Abstract

This paper examines the use of visual technologies by political activists in protest situations to monitor police conduct. Using interview data with Australian video activists, this paper seeks to understand the motivations, techniques and outcomes of video activism, and its relationship to counter-surveillance and police accountability. Our data also indicated that there have been significant transformations in the organization and deployment of counter-surveillance methods since 2000, when there were large-scale protests against the World Economic Forum meeting in Melbourne accompanied by a coordinated campaign that sought to document police misconduct. The paper identifies and examines two inter-related aspects of this: the act of filming and the process of dissemination of this footage. It is noted that technological changes over the last decade have led to a proliferation of visual recording technologies, particularly mobile phone cameras, which have stimulated a corresponding proliferation of images. Analogous innovations in internet communications have stimulated a coterminous proliferation of potential outlets for images. Video footage provides activists with a valuable tool for safety and publicity. Nevertheless, we argue, video activism can have unintended consequences, including exposure to legal risks and the amplification of official surveillance. Activists are also often unable to control the political effects of their footage or the purposes to which it is used. We conclude by assessing the impact that transformations in both protest organization and media technologies might have for counter-surveillance techniques based on visual surveillance.

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This paper examines the use of video by protesters as a form of ‘counter-surveillance’. As Monahan (2006) defines it, counter-surveillance is ‘intentional, tactical uses, or disruptions of surveillance technologies to challenge institutional power asymmetries’ (516). Marx (2003, 384) also suggests that counter-surveillance moves involve ‘turning the tables and surveilling those who are doing the surveillance’. For Mann (2002), such tactics constitute a form of ‘sousveillance’ whereby ‘cameras be mounted on people in low places, rather than upon buildings and establishments in high places’. To date, the term ‘counter-surveillance’ has primarily been engaged to describe resistance tactics aimed squarely at surveillance infrastructure itself, notably in the case of the activities of the Surveillance Camera Players in New York, or similar groups in Europe who aim to challenge the widespread dispersal of video cameras in public space (Yar 2003; Koskela 2004; McGrath 2004; Monahan 2006). However, there is a significant lineage of groups who have engaged surveillance technologies to monitor agents of state power, such as police, in order to foster accountability and render transparent instances of police brutality and misconduct (Huey et al 2006; Lyon 2007).<sup>1</sup> While these studies have focused on groups such as ‘Cop Watch’ which see their primary aim as the monitoring of police, in our study we focus on counter-surveillance by

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<sup>1</sup> Although most common in the US & Canada, there are three copwatch websites now operating in Australia, in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, although the Brisbane group goes under the name of ‘Forcewatch’. See <http://www.sydneycopwatch.org/>, <http://melbournecopwatch.org/> and <http://brisforcewatch.wordpress.com/>.

activists whose political project transcends surveillance critique, such as forest blockaders and ‘anti-capitalist’ social movements. Analysis of video activism has largely been subsumed within larger studies examining the role of ICTs in the organization, coordination and communication of social movements (Juris 2005; 2008; Atton 2002; 2003). Here, however, we wish to examine the specific attributes of video activism as a form of counter-surveillance, which is, as McGrath points out, a notable example of efforts to engage surveillance technology to invert ‘the usual vectors of power’ (2004, 198).

A rising interest in counter-surveillance and resistance in surveillance studies has to a large extent been motivated by a questioning of the dominance of the metaphor of the Panopticon and recognition of its limitations in explaining contemporary developments. Kevin Haggerty has suggested that:

the multiplication of sites of surveillance ruptures the unidirectional nature of the gaze, transforming surveillance from a dynamic microscope to one where knowledge and images of unexpected intensity and assorted distortions cascade from viewer to viewer and across institutions emerging in unpredictable configurations and combinations, while undermining the neat distinction between watchers and watched through a proliferation of criss-crossing, overlapping and intersecting scrutiny (2006, 29).

Clear distinctions between the watcher and watched are therefore increasingly undermined by the rhizomatic intertwining and intersecting of networks of observation. As Koskela (2009) notes, unambiguous distinctions between good and bad are breaking down making divisions between the authorities and public, outsiders and insiders and the controlled and controlling less apparent. Additionally, as Marx observes, ‘there is greater equality in access to and use of surveillance technologies today than in much of recorded history’ (2003, 384) and this access opens up possibilities not only for resistance but also for more active empowerment. Moreover, with the widespread availability of mobile-phone cameras and internet distribution platforms policing, traditionally a low-visibility activity, has never been more transparent (Manning 2008, 227; Goldsmith 2010). The democratization and diffusion of imaging technologies, and the scrutiny of official conduct they enable, has been enough in Koskela’s view to make ‘the old story about the “good police officers” chasing “evil criminals” sound like a naïve fairy tale’ (2009, 151).

The potential of counter-surveillance to create a transparent utopia of official accountability does however need to be tempered against empirical study of particular contexts. Scholars need to be wary of merely mirroring the technophilia of more powerful agents of surveillance in their assessments of utilizations of imaging technology from below, no matter how laudable their aims. Any surveillance activity enters a dynamic environment and will inevitably impact upon that environment (Marx 2007a), sometimes in ways considered positive but also in other ways that are unforeseen, ambiguous or negative. In this study we utilize data drawn from seventeen semi-structured interviews, most with individuals involved in video activism, but some also with ‘citizen journalists’ and community lawyers with experience in using visual images of official misconduct. Interview participants were recruited via a combination of direct contact through public websites, advertisements placed on independent media electronic lists and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they permitted participants considerable opportunity to elaborate and expand on issues they considered of importance within the context of thematic questions devised by the researchers (cf. May 2001, 123-124). All participants were offered the option of anonymity, however all chose to be identified and consequently have been named throughout this paper.<sup>2</sup> While the views and observations of participants have been faithfully recorded, the final conclusions drawn are solely those of the authors.

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<sup>2</sup> Research for this project was conducted with ethics approval from the Monash University Research Office Human Ethics Committee, Application CF09/1233-2009000641

The aim of the project was to analyse the practice of counter-surveillance in relation to the spaces of protest, the legal life of images and the distribution and consumption of visual material collected through practices of video activism. This provided an opportunity to think through the intended and unintended consequences of counter-surveillance practices and the ambiguities that subsequently emerged in discussion with participants. Our paper is organized thematically around the central issues arising from the interview data. We begin by examining the practice of video activism in protest situations, noting that such practices frequently stimulate moves and counter-moves between control agents and protestors. The outcomes of this ongoing dance are deeply contradictory, at times heightening safety and accountability, while simultaneously containing potential dangers such as video activists being targeted by authorities. Moreover the recent escalation of visual surveillance conducted by both control agents and protestors potentially dilutes the impact of monitoring. We then examine how the law is mobilized as an element of the moves and counter-moves between police and video activists. Police frequently mobilize a range of laws in order to neutralize the monitoring of video activists. Video activists also engage the law, seeing particular importance in visual evidence of police misconduct when laying complaints against police. Within the legal domain however the status of visual images as evidence was seen to be ambiguous. The power of the police to provide interpretations of visual evidence within official inquiries and legal proceedings can undermine the power of the image to hold police to account. Moreover video activists noted the risk that images might incriminate the very people it was intended to protect. Overall, the utility of visual images was principally viewed as lying in providing a bargaining tool in ‘backstage’ negotiations between police and protestors.

The final sections of the paper examine the distribution of images – both through the mainstream media and through new media platforms such as YouTube. Accessing mainstream media remains important in video activism, primarily due to the perceived reach such penetration facilitates. Participants were wary, however, that such access was accompanied by significant risk that images and their attendant narratives could be subject to considerable distortion once they entered major media channels. Importantly, all participants noted that the explosion of visual imaging technologies and potential distribution platforms has extensively transformed the practice of video activism in the past decade. While the quantity of images being captured has increased exponentially, as has the number of potential avenues of distribution, our participants’ views on what this presaged for accountability and activist practice were mixed. We conclude by considering some of the possible limitations of hyper-democratic counter-surveillance within the context of new media flows. However, we will now turn to consider the ambiguities of video-activism on the ground at protest events.

### **Counter-Surveillance: Moves and Counter-Moves**

The term ‘video activist’ refers to people who use video as a tactical tool to deter police violence, document abuse and misconduct by police authorities, and in an effort to influence and set the political agenda. Harding links the birth of video activism to three convergent trends: the emergence of a vibrant form of activism, the availability of camcorders and the failure of mainstream TV to adequately cover ‘the boom in mainstream politics’ (1998, 83). From its inception, video activism has been inextricably intertwined with a larger move and counter-move dance of tactical innovation engaging internal and external actors in protests. Video activism is thus an element of complex processes of ‘coevolution’ (Oliver and Myers 2002) whereby interactions and relationships between protestors and police stimulate tactical innovations sometimes traversing unpredictable trajectories. We are primarily interested here in what might be termed ‘witness video’. Harding suggests that witness video can function in three ways, as a pacifier at events, as a defence against false arrest or violent assault and as ‘offence’ – namely in terms of gathering evidence (2001, 65). We will now examine each of these in turn, analysing how move and counter-move are reiteratively connected.

Camcorders and other visual imaging technologies can protect the public in their dealings with police, and many individuals and organized groups have adopted the videotaping of police interactions with the public in a range of situations (Doyle 2003, 74-75). For video activists the protection of those involved in protest actions was a principal reason for monitoring police conduct and protest actions more generally. As one videographer succinctly remarked when asked the purposes of videoing protest events ‘I think safety is the main one, I think it provides protestors with a sense of safety that the police are being monitored’ (Prickett interview). Harding writes that one of the purposes of videoing protest is to act as a ‘pacifier’ in order to diffuse nascent violence at a protest event. Indeed, he observes that this objective is of such significance protestors have on occasion purchased broken camcorders purely for this pacifying objective (Harding 2001, 66-67). As Harding, a veteran video activist, notes the appearance of the camcorder could also have a material impact upon the protest itself, recollecting: ‘We also learned that video could have a direct impact on the protest itself...someone would shout ‘camera!’ if they were being assaulted and as soon as the video activist arrived on the scene the assault would usually stop’ (1998, 84). In conversation with those engaged in video activism this persistently emerged as a key objective of counter-surveillance. As one activist commented the objective of videoing was ‘dissuading them [the police] from being complete arseholes...I mean it really is that cautionary thing isn’t it – at least they know they are being watched, they may hopefully rein it in a bit’ (Morris interview). Counter-surveillance through video was viewed as a strategic tool that contained potential violent actions on the part of police. As one video activist stated ‘if a police person is being video taped they are less likely to break the law themselves if they know it could come back and bite them on the butt’ (Simpson interview).

Hardt and Negri (2004) have suggested that innovative tactics of resistance spur state agents to implement new modes of control to neutralize challenges to state power. This is evident in the ironic situation of video activists, whose efforts to secure safety through imaging renders them exceptionally visible to police. The monitoring of police in turn kindles counter-neutralization tactics, in particular ‘strategic incapacitation’ (Gillham & Noakes 2007) that aims to neutralize visual monitoring either through direct physical force or through spatial strategies of containment. Getting ‘beaten up’ was one of the foremost hazards of video activism, and those interviewed reported that individuals armed with video and digital cameras were commonly targeted by police at protest actions. One activist suggested ‘police do target people like that at protests, I’ve seen it. People with megaphones, people with cameras – they get taken down pretty quickly’ (Jacobs interview), while another recollected that ‘quite a few people have ended up with a black eye and a bruised head’ (Morris interview).

Yes we saw this during APEC in particular, it wasn’t again just not Copwatchers but members of the commercial media, there was that infamous video Paula Bronstein for example who was thrown to the ground during APEC, but again other members of the commercial media who either had police officers block their filming, or told to turn around and not to film, several of us were threatened with arrest, there was one undercover police officer who tried to snatch a camera from my hand, and so it definitely brings attention to yourself yeah (Mills interview).

Spatial strategies of isolation and containment are an additional counter-neutralization move engaged by police. Fernandez, drawing upon Foucault’s notion of disciplinary diagrams, argues that police deploy two disciplinary diagrams: the leprosy model and the plague model (2009, 170). In the plague model, space is divided into a grid and subjected to surveillance and regular inspection. In the leprosy model, lepers are expelled from communal space so that sickness is excluded (Elden 2003, 242). Video activists are clearly perceived as lepers, and are subject to processes of containment and ejection from spaces of protest. Morris identifies a definite strategy of ‘make sure you’ve identified who the camera people in the protest group are, sideline them, don’t give them any good footage and don’t give them anything that will turn up in court’ (Morris interview). While another video activist suggested ‘some police will act against you for



being the teller of the truth so you can get targeted, camera can get trashed and your tapes ripped out or personally removed from a protest because you are documenting it' (Jacobs interview).

Becoming a target of police attention also meshes with a wider range of police counter-moves at protests that seek to neutralize the impact of counter-surveillance. In many aspects, the neutralization techniques mobilized against counter-surveillance initiatives mirror the moves outlined by Marx (2003). The most common move, discussed above, is to engage a 'breaking move' that renders counter-surveillance inoperable. For police in protest situations this involves simply mobilizing the significant asymmetry power to neutralize monitoring either through physical force, the confiscation of equipment or both. Several participants discussed having their cameras and film confiscated and then damaged or reported difficulty in reobtaining the equipment. Isabelle Brown, a frequent videographer of protests, described her experience of equipment confiscation in the following way:

I've had all my tapes taken and not given back. I've had one camera smashed beyond repair, I'm still seeking compensation. I had my computer and video camera taken in house raids and my hard drives. It took me a year of calling them every second day for a year to get my gear back, plus when I got my computer back it was broken (Brown interview).

Such counter-neutralization moves stimulate innovative tactics on the part of video activists that utilize space and evasion to elude agents of control. The Sydney Copwatch website contains advice for video activists on how to best avoid arrest and confrontation while undertaking video monitoring, advising video activists to only take photos when there are others present, or others with cameras who could film any potential assault, and during protests to remain in the middle of a group. It also cautions video activists that they may be assaulted at the conclusion of a protest, and should consider handing footage on to someone else so as to avoid it being destroyed by police<sup>3</sup>. These self-protective tactics were frequently discussed by participants, particularly in the context of forest blockades where police violence can occur unmonitored by the presence of commercial media.

It's mostly direct, the threat that the person will be roughed up, that their equipment will be destroyed and so obviously you develop protocols around that, where you might have one person coming and film for a while, they leave, they put the footage somewhere safe, another person comes, so in effect, the football analogy, you have one person on the field at a time. (Cam Walker interview).

These tactics are therefore a form of rotation (Marx 2003) to avoid surveillance, but with the added twist that such an avoidance move is calculated to facilitate the continuation of monitoring. Nevertheless, police also continue to participate in such a cat and mouse game, and another frequently engaged tactic in protest situations has been the 'masking move' whereby police remove identification badges in order to remain anonymous. Dale Mills, founder of Sydney Copwatch, suggests that police generally react negatively to videoing and filming at protests as 'they don't want individual accountability, I think that's why they don't wear their badges' (Mills interview).

The constant interplay of move and counter-move between police and video activists activates ascending spirals of surveillance and counter-surveillance, what Marx has termed a 'surveillance arms race' (2007b, 299). Thus while the safety of protestors and the witnessing and documenting of misconduct remain powerful drivers of video activism, an increasingly frequent rationale of video activism is to counter the escalating visual surveillance of protest events undertaken by police. One video activist remarked:

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<sup>3</sup> [www.sydneycopwatch.org](http://www.sydneycopwatch.org)

I think it is [video] important as well to counter the incredible levels of surveillance that police put on protests. They have really sophisticated surveillance on protests, like camera positioned in key strategic areas and telephoto lenses with small digital cameras right on hot spots. So we need to have our cameras there as well because you see in cases which have happened in the past evidence the police collect, somehow all of the footage of events which incriminate the police go missing while all the evidence that might incriminate protestors of certain things comes to light (McEwan interview).

This transformation also appears to accompany a diminishing of the power of the image in relation to protests. As one video activist with fifteen years experience videoing protests remarked ‘at one point it was very powerful to have even just a portable camera there, that was the new thing...eventually they realised it was better to just have their own cameras there, so I gradually saw the collaboration of more and more police cameras’ (Jacobs interview). Situations where police are armed with cameras facing protestors armed with cameras can reach heights of absurdity, as the same videographer suggested ‘so you video them videoing you and it just gets sillier and sillier. We know you’re looking at us and it’s that sort of projection of power through the process of surveillance and sort of static’ (Jacobs interview). Such counter moves on the part of police potentially lead to a Kafkaesque situation where ‘counter counter-surveillance’ promotes a spiral of surveillance enmeshed within layers of neutralization. The surveillance spiral ends in a cancelling out, a form of surveillance gridlock, where the act of monitoring has eclipsed both action and control.

### Parrying through Law

In protest situations the law becomes an instrument mobilized by all parties to execute moves and counter-moves. Peter Manning has suggested that ‘the law serves as a mystification device or canopy to cover selectively, legitimate, and rationalize police conduct’ (1997, 94). In protest situations police regularly invoke the power of legal statute to rationalize blocking moves aimed at video activists. Video activists have been threatened with several pieces of legislation that have been mobilized to curtail filming and threaten video activists with the prospect of criminal proceedings. Dale Mills gives the following example:

In New South Wales at least it’s an offence under some circumstances to audio record a conversation without the other person’s permission, and of course most video has audio on it, and so that has raised the question as to whether for example if we’re recording a conversation between a protestor and a police officer, and neither of them know that they’re being recorded has raised the question as to whether that’s legal. On more than one occasion we’ve had police officers come up to us and say you need to turn the video off now, because you’re breaching the Surveillance Devices Act, that’s a recording device...and we’ve said but we’re not recording anyone, and the police officer said well I’m speaking to you and you’re recording me (Mills interview).

Another videographer was threatened with prosecution under recent counterterrorism laws, and was informed that the facility he was videoing (a large power station) was categorized as ‘key infrastructure’ (McEwan interview). Such inventive redeployments of law equate with the ‘soft-line’ social control outlined by Fernandez, where a wide range of legislative instruments – often diverted a significant distance from their intended purpose - are marshalled to restrict dissent (2009, 90-91).

Video activists also strategically engage the law, and the surveillance of police has significant evidentiary validation, particularly as it may be utilized to file complaints against police misconduct. For Dale Mills, founder of Sydney Copwatch, the purpose of monitoring police at protest actions is:

essentially to do the job that the superior officers should be doing, and that is to make a complaint about police misbehaviour, to highlight the question with police misbehaviour,

and to offer the video as solid evidence. People can easily challenge oral evidence, a bit more difficult to challenge photographic evidence but video is very good (Mills interview).

However, there was a consensus amongst all participants that, at least in the current regulatory system, complaints against police behaviour at protests were highly unlikely to succeed irrespective of the presence of video footage. It was suggested that there is a lack of accountability 'because the police investigate themselves, and the Ombudsman's Office endorse whatever the police do' (Mills interview). The possibility of seeking official redress is limited in a number of ways. 'Masking moves' (Marx 2003) may foreclose the usefulness of footage for official exposure of police misconduct. Complaints to the New South Wales Ombudsman, for example, have been returned on the basis that without a name or number it is impossible to ascertain the police involved. As police frequently refuse to give their name on request and just as frequently fail to wear identifying badges in protest situations they are capable of neutralizing the official visibility of the activist's camera.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, such images are inserted and recontextualized in official contexts within which police interpretations occupy a privileged, though not unassailable, position. Surveillance images are always subject to interpretation, and in the domain of official inquiry and legal proceedings police are positioned to supply the 'official definition of the situation' (Doyle 2006, 211). The structural space of those undertaking surveillance is therefore of considerable consequence, as it is not inevitably coupled with the power of interpretation. This perhaps explains the pervasive cynicism based on experience expressed by all participants regarding the capacity of counter-surveillance to render police officially accountable.

If the capacity of video footage to bring about official accountability is constrained, images nevertheless constitute an important tactical device in defending against accusations by police and in 'backstage' negotiations. Several participants noted the value of video for defence, particularly if footage captured police misconduct. John Jacobs for instance, was charged with 'assault police' at a protest. However on the basis of video evidence which exposed Jacobs himself had been 'put in a headlock and bashed in the face' the case was dismissed, although no further action was taken against police (Jacobs interview). Moreover, the mere existence of images can be deployed to negotiate with police. One community lawyer with extensive involvement in logging protests noted the utility of footage in negotiations and 'situations where we have kind of ruffled some feathers through telling the sergeant of the relevant police station of the existence of our footage, that having the impact of having that person at least informally reprimanded' (Bleyer interview).

One of the key ironies is that in monitoring and documenting protest actions video activists may inadvertently assemble a database that incriminates those it is intended to protect. Andrew Lowenthal, a video activist at numerous protest events, suggests 'the downside is that, yeah, you do the surveillance work of the police, and you can help them do dossiers, or background or convict people' (Lowenthal interview). Another videographer noted, 'sometimes...your footage might be counter-productive, so you might actually catch somebody committing an offence so that material could be used against your aims' (Prickett interview). There is consequently the danger of footage being subpoenaed, or even police raids, as occurred in 2001 at one community television station, Channel 31, which was raided by police searching for footage of protests outside a Nike store in Melbourne (Davi interview). Even footage not directly incriminating can prove ambiguous and counterproductive. For instance, following the protests at the Beverley Uranium mine, footage was subpoenaed in court of 'a greenie meeting where the greenies are saying... "we're outnumbering the cops. Let's go anyway". The cops one of their arguments is "we didn't use excessive force, we were outnumbered and we had to do this" so that video comes to support their argument' (Davi interview). Some community groups have offered specific training in video activism that includes advice to avoid filming protestors performing illegal activities (Davi interview). Nevertheless,

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<sup>4</sup> [www.sydneycopwatch.org/police-identification.html](http://www.sydneycopwatch.org/police-identification.html)



just as police may become visible under public CCTV systems (Goold 2004, 178-186), so too might video activists become subjects of their own surveillance. Potentially empowering images might also be reinterpreted in different contexts, co-opted into official archives where their meaning is perversely inverted.

### Entering the Synopticon

Despite the considerable potential of protest movements to communicate beyond mainstream media, the mainstream news media remains pivotal for the broader communication of dissent (Cottle 2008). This is particularly the case in a society where politics itself is increasingly mediated, and protests have to an unprecedented degree become reflexively conditioned by their quest for media attention (Koopmans 2004). Thomas Mathiesen's (1997) influential formulation of the synopticon, a coterminous development to Foucault's outline of panoptic power that facilitates the many watching the few is of relevance here. While Mathiesen suggested that synoptic power worked 'like a pincer' in tandem with panoptic power to foreclose 'heterodox debate' (Bourdieu 1977 cited in Matheisen 1997, 230), it is nevertheless possible that fissures exist where alternative visuals can enter the synopticon and challenge 'common sense' assumptions of power and rule. Numerous authors argue that contemporary mass media portrayal of protest is more contingent and complex than was argued in earlier studies (Cottle 2008; Wisler and Guigni 1999; Craig 2002).

In relation to witness video, faith in the power of footage to expose police brutality and misconduct is inextricably bound to the vast exposure achieved by the short video taken by George Holliday of the beating of Rodney King and its subsequent absorption into the mass media. John Fiske for example, suggested the King footage evidenced the power of the video recorder as a 'guerrilla weapon' capable of exposing structural inequalities of race and class to public scrutiny (1998, 78). However, the capacity of the King video to mobilize wider political and public questioning of the brutality of the LAPD occurred within a particular matrix of factors. Lawrence notes that the incident was able to present alternative viewpoints due to 'the dramatic mixture of gripping imagery, forceful citizen claims, and the likelihood of political upheaval' (2000, 79). And as Monahan has argued, this event did not necessarily act as a corrective to police brutality nor did it ultimately lead to a greater engagement with urban communities (2006, 528). Nevertheless, such incidents serve as emblematic media events for many video activists, reinforcing the desiderata of feeding footage to mainstream outlets whereby its impact might influence both accountability and public opinion. Accessing the synopticon, and facilitating the many to view police misconduct, consequently remains a key aim of video activists.

Participants in general noted that they had achieved more success with channelling footage to the mainstream media than in using it for official legal complaints. Community lawyer Vanessa Bleyer noted that even in cases where forest protesters were charged criminally after being involved in violence with either loggers or police, it was often more effective to use footage in media campaigns rather than reserving it for official complaints. In response, she argues a useful tactic is to 'run a media campaign, just get it out there and then the violence stops and doesn't arise again for a couple of years' (Bleyer interview). Thus the refraction of protest actions through the media can extend the safety function of video activism, tempering levels of police repression through the media spotlight (Wisler and Giugni 1999). Moreover, accessing the synopticon can enable the exposure of police misconduct on a national and even international scale. For instance, Sydney Copwatch revealed the widespread practice of police not wearing badges at the APEC protests in 2007 via the commercial media. As the founder of the group recounted 'during APEC I took just over 200 photographs of police officers not wearing badges, that had a very good outcome for us, it was a half page article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the anonymous police of APEC, highlighting the fact that many of the police officers either didn't put their badges on that day, or took them off' (Mills interview).

Nevertheless if accessing the mainstream media remains a holy grail of video activism, those interviewed were acutely aware that there was always the potential for it to become a poisoned chalice. Attitudes towards the mainstream media thus remain deeply ambivalent. One videographer, for example, questioned the continued salience of the Rodney King video as a foundational motif of video activism, suggesting it was ‘a mistake to...take the Rodney King example, of like this spectacular video equals this social outcome. I think those really spectacular videos are definitely the exception’ (Lowenthal interview). Such comments indicate the limitations of feeding footage into mainstream media. As Lawrence (2000) suggests such media penetration requires a particular constellation of dynamics. Moreover while witness video may be of interest to mainstream media, particularly where it is seen to coalesce with newsworthy priorities of policing organizational deviance (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987), the images are constrained within mainstream media framing. The demands of newsworthiness can decontextualize footage or lead to it being freighted with meanings that distort the original intentions of those filming. Videographer Andrew Lowenthal suggested footage of police violence could accumulate diverse meanings, dependent upon media framing and audience positions. He noted that ‘obviously some people would be like “Oh give that hippie a good whacking, that’s what they need” and then other people might be “that’s beyond the bounds of what police powers should be, and it should be limited”’ (Lowenthal interview). Additionally, the broadcast of police violence can also stimulate internal disorganization in protest movements. Lowenthal also recollected one incident where footage was broadcast of police brutality that far from solidifying the organization of protest, had a chilling effect leading some within the protest movement to conclude ‘oh my god these people [police] are really, really violent and I’m afraid of them. I don’t want to go out and protest, and in some ways that’s actually what the police were saying as well’ (Lowenthal interview).

The intense interest of the mainstream media in conflict and violence in covering protest events has been well documented (Waddington 1992). Earlier studies of media coverage of protest emphasized ideological framing in which ‘the police are assumed to be in the right, capable only of restrained reaction to provocation’ (Waddington 1992, 178). While contemporary media ecology renders coverage considerably more multifaceted and conditional (Cottle 2008), our interview participants nevertheless felt substantial pressure to offer up visual images of violence if they wanted to access major media outlets. As a videographer involved in an environmental protest action reported ‘they [the media] were only really interested in the footage which involved conflicts and specifically conflict with the police – that’s all they were asking for. And that wasn’t something we really wanted to highlight’ (McEwan interview). Such pressure can create internal contradictions for videographers, where they find themselves concurrently trying to prevent violence through observation while also aspiring to capture it. As one video activist remarked ‘so you’re there as a camera person to try and prevent biffos but you really want biffos to get it on telly’ (Davi interview). The hazard of the mainstream media’s preoccupation with violence was clearly articulated: ‘there are two issues. There’s the issue around which the protest and the activism is happening and then there’s the issue of police accountability and often we capture stuff which shows police behaving badly and the issue we’re trying to get attention for gets ignored for the police stuff’ (McEwan interview). Protest movements have on occasion successfully articulated wider political issues through media strategies such as theatrical spectacle (Craig 2002; Scalmer 2002), but such strategies are potentially undermined by a visual archive of violence that activates the time-worn media frame of violent protest – a media frame in which the substantive issue of protest is, in Murdock’s phrase, ‘emptied of its radical political content’ (1981, 210).

### **The Fragmentation of the Commons**

The perils of engaging with mainstream media have stimulated intense interest in alternative media production, through which activists can communicate directly both with each other and with broader audiences. Significant excitement both within and outside academia has thus been visited upon the engagement of new media technologies by new social movements, which have been variously heralded as

creating a new commons (Kidd 2003), revitalizing journalistic independence and countering the hegemony of corporate logic (Hoofd 2009). Particular attention has been given to Indymedia, short for 'Independent Media Centre', an internet-based global network that provides activist-focused media and news items. In the late 1990s Australia was part of the global advent of Independent Media Centres (IMCs) that had its origins in the Seattle globalization protests of 1999 (Castells 2001; Atton 2003; Waltz 2005). The promise of Indymedia was that it would provide a distribution and communication network that challenged corporate media. One academic-activist triumphantly proclaimed 'the revolution is...digitized and streamed' (cited in Hoofd 2009, 210). Such claims echo the broader rhetoric of 'cybercelebrants' who have loudly pronounced the potential of new media to usher in a fresh era of truly participatory democracy that upends traditional power structures seen as being embedded in 'old media' (Andrejevic 2007, 189-190). Indymedia has subsequently been critiqued for being intertwined with the capitalist overproduction of information (Dean 2008) and blind to its perpetuation of a neoliberal logic of speed (Hoofd 2009).

However, the rapid development of new media technologies has resulted in significant transformations in video activism since the early 2000s, often in ways that displace the centrality of Indymedia and like dedicated networks. The coterminous explosion of online publishing platforms and visual imaging technologies, specifically mobile phone cameras and digital cameras equipped with video has led to a hyper-democratization of video activism. As one experienced videographer suggested 'there's tons more people doing it, and it's much easier to do, and it's much easier to distribute your work and get an audience' (Lowenthal interview). Other organizations that previously dedicated themselves to witness video now primarily act as a conduit for footage collated by a veritable army of imagers. For example Sydney Copwatch (which emerged out of Human Rights Monitors) now functions principally as a clearing house for publicly submitted footage. As Dale Mills, the group's founder, notes that changes in organization were facilitated by the technology:

video technology has just become cheaper, so people are more likely to own a video camera, or a digital camera with a video facility, and that has actually had an organisational change on what was then called Human Rights Monitors to become Copwatch. Now the focus is not so much on us as dedicated observers of the police taking photos, because we have the access to the technology, but rather allowing people to take their own photos, and for us to be a contact point for people to pass photos on (Mills interview).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s video activists were 'amateur' in the sense that they had no formal connections to a profession or to institutional structures (see Atton 2003, 10). Video activism could usefully be described as a form of 'native reporting', defined by Atton as 'the activities of alternative journalists working within communities of interest to present news that is relevant to those communities of interest' (2002, 112). Thus, while 'amateur', many video activists had some level of technical training and were often aspiring film-makers who sought to contextualise events in larger narrative arcs that transcended the mere capture of events implied by witness video. More recently however the proliferation of technology has led to the 'deprofessionalization' of video activism in favour of the ubiquitous citizen journalist. Consequently a large proportion of those attending protests are now capturing images, whether on digital camera, camcorder or mobile phone. As one experienced video activist stated 'when you see a protest these days you actually often see half to three quarters of the crowd have a video camera or still camera of some description so it is very hard to distinguish or separate out the journalists from the non-journalists' (Simpson interview). The rapid move toward ubiquitous imaging was consistently identified as key trend by interview participants. As one video activist inventively phrased it 'you just kind of have a life cam on your chest and be just filming things and dumping them on your hard drive and that's part of living' (Jacobs interview).

The move from dedicated video activist to a situation where everyone is a video activist was neatly summarised by one participant who suggested that ‘the way we’re moving is towards raising the idea that everyone is a Copwatcher, certainly everyone with a pair of eyes, everyone with a camera or video’ (Mills interview). Nevertheless, despite such optimism about the future of the technology there are clearly drawbacks involved in the circulation of such a plethora of images. Video activist Louise Morris revealed her ambivalence to this phenomenon:

now all the activists are taking videos – everyone now has a camera and they’re not doing the activism...we’re so mediated now that we like to film everything – it’s proof we were there, proof we did it and then everyone’s got access to the YouTubes of the world and Engage Media and that mob are actually facilitating anyone with a camera, a computer with an editing software to throw it up there. I think it’s less specialised which is great...It’s just also those moments you turn up to actions and you realise that 50 percent of the people are actually there to film it, and then you’ve got this massively reducing pool of people who are actually on the doing side of things.

As Morris’s comments make clear, the increasing access to portable video technology such as mobile phones and digital cameras must be understood in relation to the corresponding increase in internet-related technology. In particular the rise of YouTube has significantly impacted upon the practice of video activism. Launched in June 2005, YouTube offered a simple platform for the uploading of video using standard browser software and providing URLs and HTML code that facilitated the embedding of links into other websites (Burgess and Green 2009). For some activists the proliferation of user generated content has diminished the power of the image, as one proposed ‘the proliferation of media cheapens it, it means images are not so powerful or they have to be more full-on to grab anyone’ (Davi interview). Such observations indeed recall Baudrillard’s argument that the explosion of information in a media-immersed society presaged the erasure of meaning – as he suggested ‘information devours its own contents...instead of causing communication, it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication’ (1983, 97-98).

The availability of open publishing has led some activists to question the ongoing relevance of dedicated alternative media sites. For some the very idea of ‘activist media’ seemed somewhat remote and even anachronistic in the new media environment. ‘Cameras are everywhere and everyone can post a video online...I don’t really see the need like I used to’ (Davi interview). Also, because of the availability of technology and the capacity of ‘anyone who has got a home computer’ (Davi interview) to do editing there is little necessity for the kind of distinct organization that was present at G20 protests. Others who had been involved in video activism since the 1990s revealed similar sentiments:

I think that technology has changed a bit and I think that back then Indymedia was probably the only website that would allow for open publishing, so open publishing was quite rare ten years ago, and Indymedia was actually a pioneer in that. Now with open publishing being everywhere, I don’t know that that model really works anymore...I think it feels a bit more disjointed and maybe there’s something about power in numbers. I don’t know I feel that that video activist movement has waned a little bit (Prickett interview).

As in the case of Morris, the inclination to generate endless content without context was sharply criticized by some. For those wishing to move beyond witness video in order to produce compelling narrative documentaries that contextualize events, the consequence has been an overwhelming cascade of low quality ‘soundbite’ footage that says little about the overall objectives and issues with which social movements aspire to engage. The generation of profligate images is evident not only on YouTube but seeps into dedicated alternative media sites. As Marian Prickett, an independent filmmaker and video activist, suggested

you look at a lot of the stuff at Engage Media and it's just, lots of really shit phone videos and it's not actually about telling a narrative or there's not a lot of thought given to artistry, it's just I've got to capture this event now, but just an observation really, and it's a shame because I think that those narratives can be really powerful (Prickett interview).

Robbie McEwan, a veteran videographer of numerous protests since the late 1990s, remarked

the tendency, not just in the activists' world but across society now, is to produce video, publish it on the web and expect people to watch it and it's a complete fantasy. So we actually need to make video that presents our ideas and is good and engaging and satisfying to watch...rather than just generating tons and tons and tons of stuff and having people constantly reinventing the wheel and working in isolation (McEwan interview).

A final problem is the question of who is actually watching. The problem of organization was seen to circulate around the issue of audience. As one activist remarked, 'I think the thing that gets in the way...of those efforts of organized video activists is the problem of audience. Where's the audience? How do we get the audience? And without an audience then there's no reason to organize anyway' (McEwan interview). A YouTube search under 'police brutality at Australian protest' yields 2,032 hits, with the most views for any footage not taken from the mainstream media being 9168 for footage taken from a camera phone set to the soundtrack of the Smashing Pumpkins. This pales into insignificance in comparison to the 247,348 views for the monkey urinating in its own mouth, or the colossal 54,534,718 views for the sneezing baby panda. While ICTs may be instrumental in the organization of networked social movements it may not necessarily reach an audience beyond those who already strongly identify with the position advanced. As Henry Jenkins suggests, on the YouTube platform 'some forms of cultural production are embraced within the mainstream tastes of site visitors and the commercial interests of the site owners. Other forms of cultural production are pushed to the margins as falling outside dominant tastes and interests' (2008, 124). Jenkins goes on to argue that minority content might only reach niche publics. A similar point is indicated by Andrejevic (2007) who signals the threat of 'the mind-set that allows individuals to feel comfortable deliberately seeking out only a select group of news sources with predictable slants' (2007, 205). Thus if the documenting of police misconduct and brutality is intended to foster accountability, the question then becomes is this possible via an uncoordinated avalanche of dispersed and decontextualized visual fragments?

## **Conclusion: Changing Technologies and Ambivalent Outcomes**

Our assessment of video activism may appear bleak, but this has not been the intention. Rather, as Michael Crang cautioned over a decade ago, 'simply cheering over empowerment and self-representation through video seems a little naïve' (1996, 2102). As a practice, video activism is shot through at every juncture with ambiguities, contradictions and ironies. There can be no doubt that video counter-surveillance in protest situations can be empowering. It can secure safety, modify the behaviour of control agents, generate broader discussion through the dissemination of footage and provide a powerful bargaining tool in a variety of contexts. Nevertheless it is important to acknowledge the multiple ambiguities. Counter-surveillance might also risk incriminating the less powerful. Moreover it might stimulate ever more extreme counter-moves from those seeking to disarm counter-surveillance.

Significantly counter-surveillance exists in an increasingly dispersed media landscape. Instead of the 'synopticon' advanced by Mathiesen (1997) in which the many watch the few, surveillance and counter-surveillance indicate a proliferation of watching in which the many watch the many, or perhaps, more accurately, in which the few watch the few. While this trend has been noted more darkly in relation to 'lateral surveillance' and cultures of suspicion (Andrejevic 2005; Chan 2008) the emergence and



proliferation of counter-surveillance via the ‘democratization of surveillance technologies’ suggests ‘sousveillance’ in which images of corruption, abuse and misconduct can be rapidly circulated. In relation to video activism, some remain optimistic about the opportunities, and celebratory about the democratic and inclusive potentials of new technology. Video activists such as Harding remain faithful to a narrative of inclusion and counter-surveillance politics in which ‘video technology, accessible by most activist groups, being used to provide a global broadcast available to millions of people, conveying messages that are both radical and inspiring’ (2001, xvii). Nevertheless, optimistic accounts that view such developments in utopian terms should be treated with some caution. Counter-surveillance initiatives such as those of video activists are still positioned within substantial asymmetries of power, even if such initiatives contain the capacity to destabilize the status-quo within certain contexts (Monahan 2010, 143).

The production of images from video counter-surveillance is also increasingly absorbed within the rapid information flows of new information technologies integral to the perpetuation of what Dean terms ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean 2008). There is the possibility that the proliferation of outlets and of visual images erodes the very power counter-surveillance intends to have, nullifying itself through the sheer volume of content. The problem is acute in relation to YouTube footage of police brutality, which rather than contextualized images within broader debates about police power, reduces instances to micro-spectacles of individualized violence. As Dean noted of anti-war messages circulating widely before the Iraq War, messages potentially morph into ‘so much circulating content, just like all the other cultural effluvia wafting through cyberia’ (2008, 102). The sheer ubiquity of distribution platforms and imaging devices does not in itself automatically equate to enhanced accountability of the powerful, nor does it inevitably lead to increased public condemnation of police brutality. The proliferating army of videographers thus needs to remain cognizant that counter-surveillance images require tactics and narratives to give them political force, and to avoid them simply merging into an endless sea of circulating content. Surveillance scholars, too, need to be cognizant of the complexity and ambiguity that can attend counter-surveillance practices. Our examination of video activism suggests that far from a reversal of a unidirectional gaze, counter-surveillance practices are mediated through individual, legal and informational contexts where their outcomes are unpredictable, contradictory and continually reconfigured within a rapidly changing informational landscape.

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